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THE MYSTERY OF WOODROW WILSON

BY OSWALD GARRISON VILLARD

I

ONCE upon a time, and not so long ago, there was a Governor whose heart fairly ached for democracy. To all the world his door stood ajar. Rich and poor, contented and discontented, the powerful and weak, the prosperous and oppressed, came and stood upon his threshold, beholding freely who was within. However lowly, the suppliant found his way to the side of the all-powerful to state his hopes, to plead his case. Within this council-chamber men planned by day and by night to unbind a pinioned democracy, and always the Governor showed the way to rout special privilege, to check injustice, to right wrong, that the people should more and more come into their own. When he left this room the Governor gladly went forth among those who had sent him there; "to them," he said, "I must account," to them he averred he had no higher aims than to draw the bone and sinew of the Commonwealth into its councils, and himself to reflect their views. So to his aid there flocked men of all kinds, among them those who had stood aloof from politics as from something unclean. These gave of their hearts, of their enthusiasms new-born, of their unselfish selves, of their means and their precious time, thanking the heavens for this prophet of the people, who, Allah be praised, was not one of those to pretend friendship merely to profit by men's votes.

So the praise of this Governor spread throughout the nation, and soon from beyond the limits of his State men appeared before him to say: "You shall lead us all; we, too, would taste of the New Freedom." And the champion of democracy said: "I shall serve as you will"; so that the day came when he took his place in the very topmost seats

of the mighty, and men everywhere rejoiced that here was no friend of the unrighteously great, but of the just and the righteous, one whose thoughts and acts would be known of all men. Did he not dwell and work in the open? Could not the humblest present their own petitions? Was it not familiar to all with whom he labored?

II

There are many mysteries connected with Woodrow Wilson. For the explanation of some, we must surely await the historian and psychologist of the future with access to letters and diaries, documents and State papers now sealed or marked "confidential." But the greatest mystery of all is the transformation which came over this man the day he became President and was no longer Governor. When he closed the door of his office in Trenton, he locked and left within Woodrow Wilson the accessible tribune of the people, and from that day became Woodrow Wilson the least accessible and most secluded of all our Presidents. It was not merely that he was oppressed by the magnitude of his new task; not that the office of President has grown enormously in routine duties since the days of the last Democratic President; not that a private bereavement soon bore him down; not that a physical strength none too great must be husbanded, nor even that problems of State almost unparalleled in their gravity and import took their toll of hours for waking and for sleeping. These all had their influence, but at bottom it was the policy that was changed; his own relationship to this new office was controlled by a different theory from that which ruled at Trenton.

Thus, he no longer worked in any degree in the open; he sought council of fewer and fewer; his door no longer stood ajar; even his Cabinet knew him not for days and weeks at a time, becoming often a mere chorus of ratification. Visitors and volunteer advisers were no longer welcome—more than that, they were under suspicion of some ulterior motive. The burden of proof that they were not secretly in the pay of the magnates of Wall Street rested upon them. Notably has this been the case with those having knowledge of Mexico. To have capital invested in that country is as effective a disbarment from the Presidential ear as to be doing business in Wall Street itself. Our leading financiers have

been denied a hearing—to their complete puzzlement. “ We do not want to grind axes, we do not want to ask anything. We merely wish to have the same right as the labor leaders to present to the President our point of view,” they said. In vain. Wilson must be beyond suspicion. He will not stoop to smuggle captains of industry into the White House by the back-door as Mr. Roosevelt and, on occasion, as Mr. Taft did. They are beyond the pale and must be kept there. More than that, the President in a recent speech has made it clear that success in business puts one without the Presidential ken. For in that address he stated that he did not care to hear from men who had done well under present conditions; that when he wished to get a real insight into conditions he wanted to hear from the little fellows who were bucking the tide and the currents that make against success.

But there are still other tests employed to keep men and women out of the White House. Can they interest the Presidential mind? Have they anything to give to one who communes so freely with himself and works out such vital problems of State on his little typewriter? If not, they may cool their heels in Mr. Tumulty’s outer office as long as they please. It availeth them not. Some of the strongest and most loyal supporters of Mr. Wilson have been denied a word with him, and the sole explanation is the Presidential theory that they had nothing to give him. Here we have considerable light on much that is puzzling. The President seems never to ask what *he can do for others*, particularly for those who have worked for him with complete and devoted enthusiasm. Their homage is accepted; but it never occurs to Mr. Wilson that there might be a reciprocal obligation. He never realizes how much a friendly handclasp, a pat on the back, a word of whole-hearted praise would do for one laboring by day and by night in his service or that of the party. So he has been a stranger even to his own lieutenants.

On going to Washington in May, 1915, I met an official of high position in one of the departments, in whose hands were matters of the utmost moment. His confidential reports would profoundly have affected the whole country had they seen the light of the day. They were constantly placed upon the President’s desk. Yet I found that this official had never seen the President except to shake hands with him in the line-up at an official reception. Had the President but once

sent for him and merely said: "You are doing splendid work; I appreciate it more than I can say, and I am proud to have you in my Administration," he would not only have bestowed a just reward on a deserving official, he would have made happy a devoted personal follower, and what is more important, he would have stimulated to even better efforts a highly important officer of the Government. This is not an exceptional case. It is characteristic; and it is the more extraordinary because Woodrow Wilson was once a football coach, in which position the value of team-play is certainly not underestimated. Dozens of similar cases could be cited. Even diplomatic officers returning from positions on some of our international "fronts" with first-hand information have been thunderstruck to find that their opinions were neither sought nor desired by the White House.

Take the case of the Federal Reserve Board. The creation of the system of which it is the head is one of the very great constructive achievements of the Wilson Administration. A year after its appointment its members had never met the President save at an official reception to which they were not even invited until the attention of some White House functionary was called to the presence in Washington of this highly important new board. It never occurred to the President to send for them in order to talk over their work, to stimulate them with his own personal interest, to learn of their problems and perplexities at first hand. So they began and carried on their duties without any personal contact with the man who appointed them and to whom they were responsible. Toward members of Congress his attitude is similar, save that these gentlemen are sent for when the President wants them to do something for him—to put through some legislation or to cease in their opposition to something which the President in his closet has decided that the party must do before the election.

One of the President's warmest supporters tells an amusing story of a fellow-Congressman who came to him two years after the President's inauguration to ask him to get an appointment with Mr. Wilson. The man approached said: "Why, all you have to do is to go to Tumulty and tell him you want to see the President and he will fix you up." "Nothing doing," was the reply. "I have tried that half-a-dozen times. Tumulty promises, but nothing happens. Now you see I have got to go back home for several weeks. All

the folks home will be asking me: ' Well, Abner, how does the President talk to you about this German business when he sees you? ' So far I have bluffed them. But if they should get on to the fact that I've never seen Wilson to speak to him it would end my chance of re-election, for they would be saying: ' If Abner ain't never seen the President there is sure something wrong with Abner that the President knows about! ' ' ' Being completely self-sufficient, it never occurs to Mr. Wilson that a word of instruction or inspiration or praise or just a bit of human interest in them would mean much to appointive officials, or that elective ones might suffer innocently because of his complete indifference to them until they became pawns in his game.

It must be said in Mr. Wilson's favor that he plays no favorites beyond one or two intimates. Men who expended large sums for him in 1912, who nearly worked their heads off for him in New Jersey, have all experienced equality of treatment at his hands. The Jerseymen have not, it must be admitted, always appreciated this, but that is merely because they, too, are a little bit puzzled by the mystery of the President's transformation. They have found it hard to understand that the old cordial relationships of New Jersey could not be maintained with dignity in Washington; that they must wait for weeks, perhaps, for an appointment, and that the Woodrow Wilson they knew did not leave Trenton. Rank and power Mr. Wilson certainly does not bend the knee to, whatever other Presidents may have done. The Democratic chairman of one of our greatest States, on reporting his presence in Washington to the White House, was once asked to wait over until the next day to see the President. He did so at some personal inconvenience—and found himself in the Tuesday morning public line-up, behind the Grand Army man who lost a leg at Shiloh and in front of the nonagenarian who has voted " for every President since Tyler, sir." The President said: " How do you do, I hope you're well," to the Chairman with just the same cordiality and warmth with which he greeted the veteran and the veteran voter—whereupon the chairman took the train home, wondering why he had been asked to sacrifice those twenty-four hours.

Sometimes, however, the President's refusal of himself to others has more important results. Thus there was a Governor once, who, being in Washington, thought to avail him-

self of the time-honored gubernatorial privilege of seeing and talking with the Chief Magistrate as to the state of the Union. At first it seemed as if his quest would be successful. Then something happened in the inner office. Was it the question: "What has he to give me?" Possibly. At any rate the Governor went his way without a glimpse of the head of the nation. I have always wondered whether the Governor did not remember this happening when, a few weeks later, the President was asking this selfsame official to spare the life of a convict of international interest, only to have his request refused. The Cabinet, as already indicated, does not come in for many special privileges. There are, of course, wicked persons to suggest that there are some members of his Cabinet even a President ought to be forgiven for ignoring. But it is a fact that some of his ablest ministers have known him only in so far as the routine of their offices demanded his attention. One of the strongest assured me that he had never been asked for an opinion in three years save at Cabinet meetings—not even during the *Lusitania* crisis was he asked to an informal consultation, or invited to give his views.

In his handling of the *Lusitania* crisis we can see clearly the theory of the office of President maintained by the author of *Congressional Government* and *Constitutional Government in the United States*. The writer of this article believes that Mr. Wilson laid the country under a lasting obligation by his successful handling of that situation, and that history will accord a high place to the extraordinary series of *Lusitania* notes about which it is now the fashion to sneer. But even an admirer of this fine statesmanship may look with uneasiness upon a policy by which in so great a crisis the way out is found in almost solitary communion. Mr. Wilson held no Cabinet meetings at that grave time save to lay before his Constitutional advisers for their approval the fruits of his mediation. In between whiles he scarcely saw them—not even the Secretary of State. Some telephoned to him; others wrote him letters carefully considered, with drafts enclosed of the replies they would advise. At the time of the first note the popular unrest over this evident failure to take counsel led the White House *entourage* to dwell strongly upon all the evidence of contact between the President and his advisers. But that was offset when Mr. Wilson, in the midst of the crisis, went to Cornish and secluded himself absolutely for

twenty-five days—a Presidential happening one must go far back in our history to parallel, if it can be paralleled at all. During this entire time no visitor crossed the threshold to discuss public affairs.

Out of all this, comes the patent fact that Wilson government is one-man government, of a different type from the Roosevelt brand, but none the less government by an individual to a most unusual extent. It is not party leadership, but party dictatorship.

If any one doubts this, let him recall how the Democratic party has been committed by Mr. Wilson personally to various new policies. Until he swung the Democratic party to advocacy of a large army and navy, to the government by protectorate of Hayti and San Domingo, to the purchase of the Danish West Indies, the Democratic party had always been the anti-imperialistic party, as shown by its record on the Philippines and by its consistent opposition to large military forces. When Mr. Wilson decided, for political reasons, that the time had come in 1915 to reverse his position of December, 1914, in regard to "preparedness," he neither took a vote of his Cabinet nor of the party leaders as to whether the historic party policy should be changed. It is also characteristic that at this time he refused to receive a group of citizens, composed chiefly of his supporters, who wished to urge him not to change his position. Now whether one approves of the change or not, whether "preparedness" is wise or foolish, it is obvious that this kind of leadership is not responsible party leadership, nor does it seem wholly compatible with the theory that the President is merely in office to find out what is the people's will—which is Mr. Wilson's opinion so frequently expressed. Similarly, his changes of base in the matter of the Trade Commission, of woman suffrage, a child-labor law, and the tariff itself—to mention only a few of his complete reversals of policy—were made by Mr. Wilson himself without party consultation. The question has not been: Ought the Democracy to confess that it has been wrong heretofore, and that after careful deliberation it had decided to take the back track; but, apparently, whether, in the view of Mr. Wilson and his immediate following, more votes were to be gained from Progressives or Republicans by stealing these or those particular clothes from the enemy. In other words, the President's policy appears to be purely opportunist as well as purely individual in its initi-

ative. As a result, members of Congress have actually been afraid to utter the usual campaign speeches in Congress during the last few months for the familiar circulation in the fall (under frank) at home, lest the President in his bed-chamber change the party policy overnight, and thus leave them advocating something the President had discarded in the name of Democracy and democracy. It is a far cry from the day when Grover Cleveland, on being told that his advocacy of a tariff for revenue only would make certain his defeat, assured the party leaders that he preferred defeat if need be. What a glorious and how unheeded a lesson!

The mystery of the change in Mr. Wilson is intensified by his treatment of the Washington newspaper men. The first day upon which he greeted them as a body they were to be his bosom friends. Did they not have unequalled opportunities for telling him how their home-constituencies—by whose will he was to be ruled—were thinking? Would they not be his wireless antennæ recording for him the throbbings of the political ether? Unfortunately these unofficial ambassadors of the plain people had a habit of asking searching questions—there are some pestiferous Republicans among them—which were not welcome to the man who, obviously ill at ease, stood by his desk, flanked by a stenographer and two secretaries, to parry those questions as best he might. Soon there were subjects about which the correspondents were forbidden to ask any questions—for State reasons. Next, the conferences became irregular, and finally they ceased altogether in July, 1915. The last one was held on the day of the acceptance of Mr. Bryan's resignation, when a group of puzzled correspondents endeavored in vain to ascertain whether it was a Cabinet resignation which was holding up the then-pending note to Germany.

It is now reported that in deference to political exigencies and to the urging of Vance McCormick these conferences are to be resumed. Nothing can make them a success, for the element of mutual trust and cordial friendship is lacking. Who shall explain the mystery of this change in attitude as contrasted with that which existed in Trenton? To the correspondents who then worked with him, writes one of them,—David Lawrence, in *The Independent*,—Gov. Wilson "was friendly and intimate. He joked and told stories. He was not cold and detached. He was warm-hearted, alert—a common man, breathing common aspirations." The pity of it is

that it is the President who loses. He was right in 1913: the Washington correspondents can be of enormous usefulness to a man in high office if only they are rightly handled and confidence is placed in them by one who does not think himself too vastly superior to them to profit by their aid. There is much in the old fable of the lion and the mouse.

Unfortunately, what is true of these relationships is true of Mr. Wilson's life in the White House. It is reserved and retired, and notably so in contrast to the Roosevelt régime, during which the White House itself and its frequenters were at the high-water mark of interest and variety. Although a Southerner, and for so long a college president supposed to keep open house for faculty and students, Mr. Wilson entertains but little. In this respect the high hopes built upon his second marriage seem not to have been fulfilled. His early choice of a remote Summer home in Cornish was such a mistake that his devoted White House followers, to whom Mr. Wilson is indeed a hero, are understood to have rejoiced mightily when the Summer house on the New Jersey shore (which has not been occupied at this writing) was offered and accepted. It is true that at Trenton he also entertained little, but then his circumstances were different. What his warmest admirers have kept on hoping for is that others besides themselves might have access to that *bonhomie* they enjoy, and might thus be disabused of any idea that the President is a mere thinking-machine without any heart and interested in people only so far as they have something to give. The luncheon, and particularly the White House luncheon, is a great counter-irritant, a solver of many problems, a salve for many sores. It has been little used by Mr. Wilson, and its absence is perhaps one reason why so many Representatives and Senators feel that they exist in the Executive's opinion only to be sent for when the President thinks there is something that they can do for him. Whether or not this is due to an inability to find congenial intellectual companionship, and because no other kind is tolerable, the aloofness of the President is the lasting regret of all his friends.

If Mr. Wilson's failure in these relationships of official life merely affected himself they could readily be dismissed as the individual idiosyncrasies of a great man, and no public man is without weaknesses and shortcomings. But these Wilson traits have a distinct bearing on the future of the

Democracy. They must be taken into account by any voter who would forecast the kind of President Mr. Wilson would be in a second term, when the temptation will be behind him to lower the public service by bestowing offices for political reasons, by surrendering to organized labor, as in the matter of efficiency in the Government service, by frequently reversing his positions. They throw, moreover, an important light upon Mr. Wilson's attitude toward his office, his whole theory of the Presidency and his use of the executive power.

Indeed, their significance ranges far beyond the fortunes of Woodrow Wilson himself: for they explain why it is that whereas there were once notable bodies of young Cleveland men, like the Reform Club group in New York, there has been no similar raising-up of young Wilson men to carry on the standard in the years to come. There was a beginning in the early efforts to oppose Tammany Hall, but with the surrender to Murphy, as illustrated by the Johnson case, no more is heard of a reform Democracy in New York. As for the leader in the White House, no fair man doubts his extraordinary ability, his frequent lofty statesmanship, his rare wit, his unbounded power to charm when he will but unbend. He can rise to great heights both in words and deeds. Despite many base anonymous rumors, his private life is all that it should be. It may well be that Mr. Wilson will be re-elected because of his undoubtedly great services, notably, of course, in keeping us out of the war. But if he is, it will be a curious case of a President being chosen again who is unloved by his party or by the grateful masses of his countrymen.

The tragedy of it is that there are those who ought to know who believe that the President desires nothing so much as to be loved, not for what he has achieved, nor for his intellectual powers, but for himself alone.

III

Once upon a time there was a President who took office amid the plaudits of men everywhere who cried: "Behold, there is one set over us who thinks not of himself but yearns for us." They thronged from all sides, murmuring to one another that if they could but touch the hem of his garments they would be his servitors for life, and thinking that if he would but speak to them it would be as manna from Heaven. Too long had they been governed by men who served them

only for what they could get out of those who trusted them. They would ask no reward, they said, for they wanted none. They felt that to serve this new leader was reward enough. Did they not, in aiding him, but aid themselves and the cause of freedom and justice? And they loved him the more for the enemies he had made when he took up their wrongs. But soon the one within the white temple denied them nearly all, and one by one these ardent ones fell away from him, going back to their avocations, with their hearts sad within them. No longer did they see a Mecca at Washington. The high hopes in the hearts of these men, that there was one to lead them into the promised land, seemed to have come to naught. The covenants of the prophets, they cried, are no longer his; these are new ones made by himself that he worships. Then how can we, his disciples, know which are the true covenants, since they all glimmer and dissolve as we view them? And behold, he now strikes hands with those whom but the other day he cast out from among us as unclean.

He is wise, O Lord, and great, they prayed. But upon whom shall we now cast our eyes?

OSWALD GARRISON VILLARD.